

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time
“The Witness of a Canaanite Woman”
Fr. Frank Schuster

It is good to be back from vacation. Thank you for putting up with my absence. I am refreshed and ready to get back to work. Watch out world! We have a very challenging Gospel reading this weekend. There are some spiritual gems in this Gospel reading if we take the time to really pray with it. A Canaanite woman approaches Jesus for help. She isn't named. Whenever you encounter someone who is not named in Scripture, this is an invitation to allow ourselves to become that person for a moment. This desperate mother seeks out Jesus because her daughter is tormented by a demon. She is at her wits end; however, she is also hopeful that Jesus can help her. She wants to have a relationship with Jesus whom she believes can save her daughter. What happens? This woman is startled to discover that Jesus is displeased with her. Jesus begins his relationship with her by telling her that her life is all wrong and that she doesn't even belong to his fold. What a nightmare, can you imagine, to think that an encounter with the Lord could begin that way!

And the interesting thing is St. Paul had a similar experience. Paul thought his life was perfect. He was a zealous Pharisee, riding his horse to Damascus oblivious that he was riding blindly to perdition. What Paul needed was to be physically blinded by the Lord, knocked off his high horse so to speak, before Paul could finally understand that his life was all wrong, he was going the wrong way. In our second reading, St. Paul is now reflecting on how “God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all.” If you think the Canaanite woman and Paul are anomalies, read the Gospels sometime and count how many times Jesus tells his disciples that they are just not getting it. In fact, when you read the Gospels, notice how often the disciples come across a can short of a six pack not understanding what Jesus was trying to say and do.

You and I are not off the hook either. I think when we approach Jesus in prayer there can be an expectation that Jesus is going to always wrap his arms around me just the way I am. And as comfortable as that would be, the idea that we might be displeasing to God doesn't enter into our minds. I mention this because I think many of us are concerned with the conflicts in our world today and in parts of our country as well. There is much for us to pray about. However, I think when God looks down from heaven...he can't be pleased with it. He can't be pleased with all the finger pointing in our politics today. It is only going to get worse as the election gets closer. He can't be pleased at all with any discrimination based on the color of someone's skin nor can he be at all in favor of violence or intimidation. The first basic message of the Gospels that Jesus proclaims to us is to repent. I think it is safe to say that we don't know how to do that very well in our country. We are more comfortable casting blame on someone else than we are looking in the mirror. This is a problem that I think we can all see in our world today, and it is a spiritual problem too. It really is.

And so, the Canaanite woman encounters the Lord and is shocked to discover the Lord doesn't like what he sees. But then notice the moment of grace. Notice how this Canaanite woman responds. Instead of getting angry, defensive, or despairing, she perseveres. She perseveres in faith. She perseveres and says something very remarkable and humble, demonstrating her conversion of heart. After demonstrating her heartfelt humility, an amazing reversal in her relationship with the Lord occurs: Jesus says, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish". Her daughter is saved.

My friends, there are spiritual gems in the Gospel reading today. And I think the best way to understand it is the experience you and I might have when we go to the doctor for this or that ailment and the doctor, instead of giving us pills, tells us we need to make a lifestyle change. We hate that don't we? There are two choices we can make when the doctor tells us that we need a lifestyle change, say to stay away from French fries and milk shakes or whatever: either we make the lifestyle change or we don't. Just like it is difficult for a patient to be healed by a doctor, unless they come to a place of truth and honesty about their situation, and be willing to make lifestyle changes, Jesus will find it difficult to heal us unless we have a conversion of heart. We have to be willing to make a lifestyle change to orient our lives towards him. The Canaanite woman demonstrates to Jesus she is ready to make that lifestyle change to become a believing follower of Jesus. As a result, wonderful things happen for her and her daughter

Now, after the reversal of fortune in the Gospel reading, something beautifully ironic happens. Jesus was sent to heal the house of Israel, and although Israel had the age old covenants and prophets heralding the coming of the Messiah, the Israelites just didn't get it. This poor Canaanite woman is proclaimed by Jesus to have more faith than all of Israel. What a reversal of fortune: she starts out in the story an outcast and the story ends with her becoming an evangelist, someone with a rich and wonderful relationship with Jesus, and an example to others of what a Christian should look like. Nothing in life could have been better for her than her encounter with the Lord, as difficult as that conversion process was. Again, she isn't given a name. This is an invitation for us to see ourselves in this Canaanite woman for a moment.

And so, what is the challenge this week? I think the challenge this week is to meditate on the question, if Jesus were to look at my life right now, would he be pleased or displeased? I think if we were honest with ourselves I believe we would recognize many areas in our lives that Jesus is very pleased with and a few areas in our lives where Jesus is displeased with. Once we come to a place of honesty of the areas in our lives that we need to sincerely work on, the invitation then is to persevere like the Canaanite woman in the Gospel today, to make whatever spiritual lifestyle changes we need to make to become better disciples of the Lord.

The Good News is God wants all to be saved through an honest relationship with him. We are challenged to learn from the humility and bold perseverance of the Canaanite Woman, who opened her heart to an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ, an honest relationship, and through the process of conversion, she discovered how rich and wonderful life can be for her and her family. We can too if we let the Lord transform our hearts. And, by extension, so can the world!